Patrice Moor: Stations of the Cross

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The human skull: as a symbol of mortality, it has an unparalleled place in the history of Western art, most famously perhaps in the anamorphic projection that smears across the earthly vanities of wealth, status, and learning depicted in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. In this work, the disconcerting intrusion of a distended skull transforms the scene from conventional portraiture into another genre entirely: the *vanitas* painting. What at first glance appears to be a record of worldly achievement becomes instead a glimpse of human frailty, as if a fissure in the superficial fabric of so-called reality has disclosed a deeper truth: the brevity of life and finality of death that renders wealth, rank, and privilege equally meaningless.

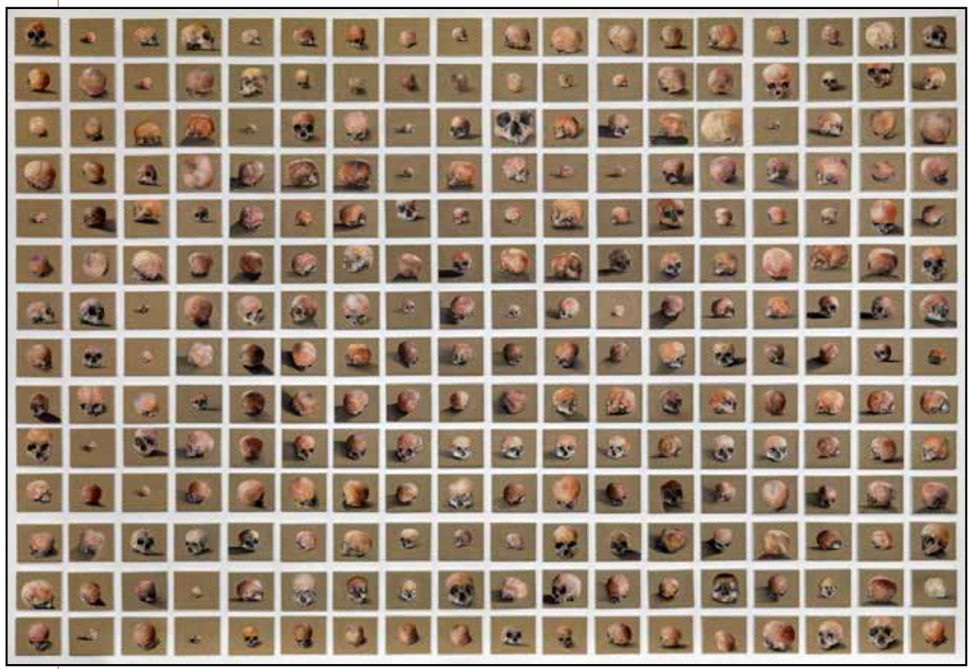
Skull as *vanitas* or *memento mori* has a persistent presence in art, drawing upon the imagery of ossuaries, plague houses, brotherhoods of death and the medieval *danse macabre*. One thinks of all those Dutch still-lives, where rival symbols of death sit cheek by jowl: newly-bagged corpses of game, yellowing papers, guttering candles, and toppled goblets. Cut flowers in full bloom and bowls of ripened fruit add to this cloying atmosphere of mortification, appearing in their vitality to be on the very cusp of degeneration, the fragile beauty of the one and sensual pleasure of the other so terribly vulnerable to the onset of age and decay. Amidst all these signifiers of death we find the ubiquitous skull, a virtually obligatory element of any still-life which meditates in any way upon the evanescence of life and its withering away in death, as perhaps all do, as nature *morte*.

Hans Holbein the Younger
The Ambassadors, 1533
Oil and tempera on oak panel
81.5" by 82.3"
National Gallery, London

Originating in seventeenth-century Holland, the tradition of *vanitas* painting emerged as a token of religious observance for the wealthy, a form of indemnification against what Simon Schama has called "the embarrassment of riches."[1] It did so by alluding to the transience of life and certainty of death through representations of mortality and ephemerality alongside signs of wealth and worldly possessions: the all-too-briefly-enjoyed pleasures of this world allied with intimations of the next. These were reminders, literally *memento mori*, of one's inexorable fate, for which nature *morte* offered the perfect pictorial form. This category of painting was not confined to still-life. In paintings like Frans Hals' *Young Man Holding a Skull*, an allegory of death coalesces with the very flush of youth, the theme of *vanitas* confronting the pleasures and accomplishments of temporal existence with their inevitable loss.[2] The skull, such images seem to tell us, is always there beneath the skin. Other more explicitly religious images honoured this tradition in an apparent effort to resolve this dialectical tension, most notably all those penitent saints by Zurburán or Caravaggio, skull in hand like contemplative Hamlets, in which the skull becomes a kind of icon, a medium for prayer or meditation.

By the time Cézanne came to paint his somewhat uncharacteristic tableaux of skulls, tellingly all painted towards the end of his life, the genre had long since fallen out of fashion. And yet, surprisingly perhaps, it has undergone a revival of sorts since the turn to the twenty-first century. Some have spoken of "a new visibility of death," even a return of the repressed, both in terms of academic interest shown in the rituals of death and in artistic response to this hoary theme.[3] Contemporary artists continue to evoke the existential powers of the skull or attest to the

melancholy of entropic nature. Consider Anya Gallaccio's perishable installations of flowers or apples, or Sam Taylor-Wood's *Still Life*, a time-lapse film of decaying fruit. Or we might think of Gabriel Orozco's checkerboard skull, or Alastair Mackie's *Mud Skull* where the crushing indomitability of death represented by the skull is rendered in the most fragile of media, invoking perhaps an archaeological sense of historical, rather than ever-present, death. Closer in style to the Dutch still-life, for whom that earlier *vanitas* tradition seems an obvious precursor, are Gerhard Richter's photorealist paintings of skulls or candles. The bare simplicity of these paintings evokes an atmosphere that is at once "serene, meditative, overtly classical, and eerie," seen by some as forerunners of



the overtly politicized reflection upon mortality of the *October 18, 1977* series.[4] Then there is of course Damien Hirst's flirtation with motifs of death, a constant theme in his oeuvre enacted through numerous painted, sculpted, and paint-bespattered skulls, and culminating in the ultimate paean to exorbitant vanity, a work that embodies in itself both the ostentation of earthly riches and their meaninglessness absurdity in death: his diamond-encrusted *For the love of God*.[5] If, in Hirst's hands, the skull becomes a simple signifier of morbidity, offering easy access to an apparent profundity, by contrast, among the curious *memento mori* of modern art to which Hirst is clearly indebted, Andy Warhol's use of the skull stands out as particularly striking yet quite unlike its earlier forebears. Warhol's late reversion to the theme of death and disaster resulted in, among other now iconic images, a series of repeated, yet dramatically differentiated screenprints of skulls. These large canvases contrast the stark graphic quality of the skull itself with a shockingly brilliant palette of colors, such that, as Jane Dillenberger so eloquently put it, "the luscious brushwork and color give this macabre subject a contradictory lyricism and gripping beauty."[6]

In whatever form they take, the motifs of the *vanitas* tableau operate figuratively, all save the skull for, as John Ravenal has written, "as an actual by-product of death, the skull evokes life's transience in an immediate, primordial way."[7] Perhaps so, but like all aesthetic representations of death, it too must do so elliptically. This is the allegorical logic of all such images: they are necessarily mediated representations of death, since death is the singular unknown

of human experience, the "incessantly receding, ungraspable signified" of all such signifiers.[8] As Elisabeth Bronfen describes it, "It is the one certainty we have, but also the one thing we know for certain we can't know. It is something we can expect, something that imposes itself upon us, but at the same time it is something we can't touch."[9] In the skull, we have the ideal form of this hollow mediator, an object we can indeed touch but whose significance continues to elude us; held in the hand it yet escapes the grasp of the mind. In one sense, it is the very embodiment of death; yet in another it seems curiously disconnected from death, a post-mortem object eliciting little of the horror or human associations of a corpse.

Where in this brief potted history of the skull can we situate the skull paintings of Patrice Moor's *Stations of the Cross*? Or perhaps a better question to ask is how a symbol of *vanitas* and motif of nature *morte* translates into the related yet distinct visual tradition of the *via crucis*. In this series, Moor presents us with twelve exquisitely painted views of the same skull, finely rendered in muted tones that convincingly reproduce the naturalistic mottled patina of age against a dark, featureless background. However, displayed in a single installation rather than sequentially throughout the space, and presenting a gradually rotating view of the same skull rather than the scenes of the passion, can it be said to adequately reflect this devotional practice?

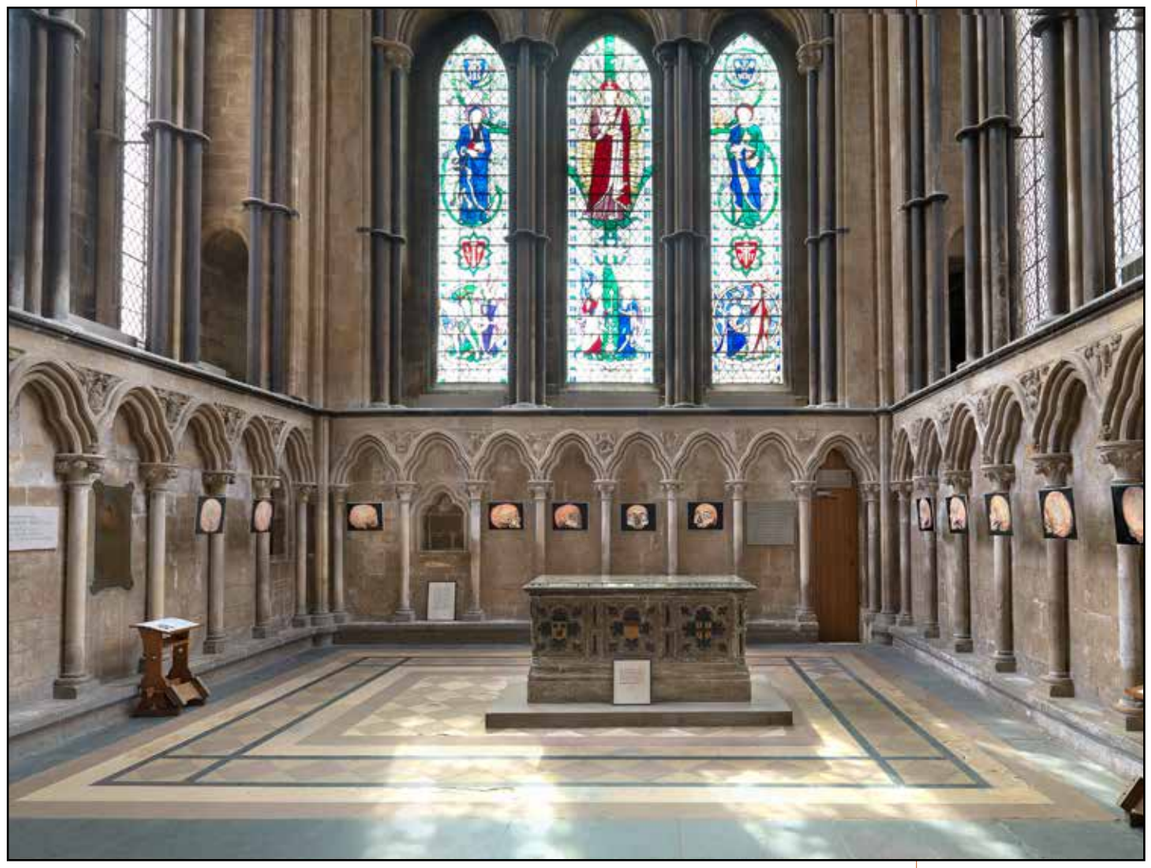
Even before we question the justification of her choice of motif, there is the fact that we are presented with twelve and not the traditional fourteen stations. Admittedly, it was not until 1731 that the number of the stations was fixed at fourteen by Pope Clement XII. Prior to that, twelve stations were common, and only eight actually have clear scriptural foundations. Occasionally, an additional station is incorporated into the series to commemorate Christ's resurrection but so infrequently that it must be considered untypical. Whichever is deemed the most appropriate number, there is still the unusual choice of referencing each station with a skull. These stations are clearly not intended to record the storyboard scenes of the Easter passion, but instead place all emphasis upon the culminating spectre of death, which presides over each narrative event. In this sense, then, there seems less of an

obligation to present them in a sequential arrangement as stations of meditation or prayer, as is usually the case. It is not the progression to crucifixion these skulls evoke, but the site itself —Golgotha, the place of the skull—and its expected climax: the execution of a purportedly dangerous revolutionary. In these stations, it is neither the image of atonement nor redemption that predominates, but that of death in all its finality. Once again, Holbein stands out as a perspicuous precedent. In his *Dead Christ Entombed*, the viewer is granted a macabre glimpse of Christ's drawn and dessicated cadaver in the first stages of corruption, within a sealed, coffin-like tomb.

Here, however, we find that Moor's skulls do raise a theological problem. They represent the aftermath of the suffering where decomposition has fully achieved its work on the body, leaving only the bare bones. If Holbein's Christ so shocked Dostoevsky into declaring that so absolutely and irrevocably dead did this Christ appear that one might lose one's faith over such an image, how much further removed from life is the image of a skull. After all, despite the fact that the stations traditionally end with Christ's pictorialized death, this is only the first part of the story; the final denouement of this drama is yet to come. Unlike the saintly reliques of finger and hip bones, jaws and ribs, Christ has left no such corporeal remnant, his bodily resurrection leaving behind nothing but an empty tomb. Unless, of course, the stations are no longer the focus of Christ's suffering unto death but now act as a kind of reflection, for we whose fate it is to become in time this hollow and ossified crust. If so, then their nearest equivalent would be those cadaverous sculptures one finds in many a British cathedral of bishops whose monument

commemorates not what they were in life, but what their mortal remains have become in death: a shrunken, worm-eaten corpse.

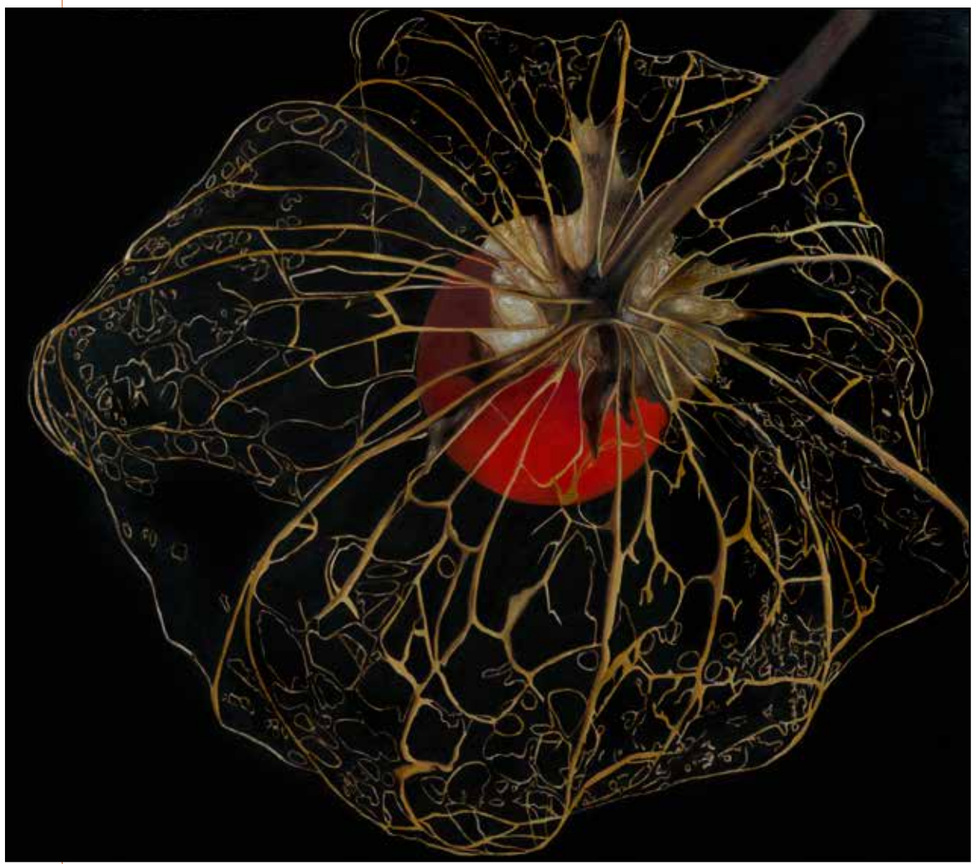
The human skull has a metaphysical puissance in the way that, say, an animal skull does not. It speaks not simply of death but the awareness of death: the reflective capacity to ruminate upon our own mortality. One of the central pillars of Martin Heidegger's philosophical schema is a notion of being that he called "Being-towards-Death."



Only by recognizing and confronting our finitude can we live authentically, thereby extracting ourselves from blind immersion in the inauthenticity of everyday life. In this sense, it is death, not life, that forms the horizon of being, the existential limit of our selfhood. And yet, however definite our death may be, for most of us it remains an indefinite future event that plays little part in day-to-day life. The subjects of *The Ambassadors*, dead for centuries, may have given little thought to their own demise when posing for Holbein, and have indeed attained a kind of immortalization through their extant representation. Are we not equally inclined to intimations of immortality, against all the evidence, and against which Moor's paintings so vitally bring us up short? What is then elicited in these works is a certain propinquity to death: a *memento mori* for a modern age. As Duncan Dormor, Dean of St. John's College Chapel, Cambridge (where this series was first shown), observed in an extended meditation on Moor's paintings, "to contemplate the human skull is to see a portrait of what we shall be, is to dwell upon our own

deaths, our own mortality." Perhaps this is where a religious rather than existential outlook equips us for death for, as Dormor continues,

> such reflection helps us to strip away the things that don't matter, to strip away all the things we do to feed our own sense of importance—the pursuit of status or moral worth in the sight of others; the distractions of wealth or pleasure which seem to bring us comfort and insulation from the harshness of the world; all those vain things 'that charm us most'; that feed our egos; which we engage in to make us feel better about ourselves.[10]



If, in Heidegger's *Weltanschauung*, death is the ultimate meaning of life, in another sense death marks the end of meaning, "the moment," says British literary theorist Terry Eagleton, "when meaning haemorrhages from us."[11] The portrait of death in a skull can be, as it was for Hamlet, the great leveller of humankind, reducing human particularity to the same earthy generality, the same vacant remainder. But equally, in handling the skull of Yorick, Hamlet comes face to face, as it were, with a singular death. Troubled by the disparity between his memory of the flesh-and-blood jester and his calcified remains, the gap between the living and the dead diminishes as the skull, once again, serves as a pointer to precarious life.

Interestingly, in Moor's more recent work, her focus has shifted from this precariousness of life to its resilience, yet with decay still centrally present. For a residency at the Royal College of Physicians in 2013, she studied through paint the natural life cycle of plants, using its medicinal garden as her basis for inspiration. The garden complemented her aesthetic focus on mortality, here translated into the cycle of decomposition and regeneration, this year-long residency allowing her to witness the garden's seasonal change, from the dormancy of winter to the rapid growth of spring. These vegetal investigations are even reflected in a companion piece to *Stations of the Cross*, another series of skull paintings featuring the same skull used for that earlier project. *Tête de Mort* is composed of 252 small paintings (all 12 x 15 cm), closely grouped in a wall-sized configuration. It portrays the skull in every conceivable permutation of viewpoint and scale, all painted using a limited palette of just six colors, and all against the same sepia background, adding uniformity to variation. Despite the obvious similarity to its precursor, *Tête de Mort* is, if anything, closer to Moor's work on plant and vegetable life. It takes a more analytical, forensic approach to the skull as a natural object, divorced from its human origins.

These latest projects bring us full circle, a reminder that entropy is only one stage in a process that leads to the reanimation of life. And perhaps this focus on death is an object lesson in the contrast between spiritual and material life since, for the Christian, the testimony of the resurrection, as Charles Wesley so eloquently wrote, is that death has lost its sting, the boasting grave must renounce its victory.

Notes

1. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London: Collins, 1987).
2. John B. Ravenal, *Vanitas: Meditations on Life and Death in Contemporary Art* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2000), 13.
3. Thomas Macho, "The Return of the Dead After the Modern Age," in *Six Feet Under: Autopsy of our Relation to the Dead* (Bern: Kunstmuseum, 2006), 26.
4. Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 116.
5. Conversely, Alexander Nagel has recently argued that the prototype of F*or the Love of God* is not in fact the *vanitas* object but rather the bejeweled reliquary: "A skull on its own is a *vanitas* emblem, signifying the passing of earthly things. A piece of jewelry or any other luxury item on its own can also be a *vanitas* emblem, signifying empty worldly value. But a skull encrusted with diamonds? The real prototype here, and the governing logical model, is the relic in its precious reliquary." Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 64.
6. Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 73.
7. Ravenal, *Vanitas*, 14.
8. Elisabeth Bronfen, "The Mortality of Beauty," in *Six Feet Under: Autopsy of our Relation to the Dead*, 43.
9. Ibid.
10. Revd. Duncan Dormor, *The Skull as Crucible* (http://www.flickr.com/photos/rinkratz/7050601851).
11. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 164.